New Testament Manuscripts

The New Testament plays a very central role in Christianity. For most Christians, the New Testament is not only a precious record of the life of Jesus Christ and the apostles, but a divine revelation to mankind on matters of salvation. Christians of all denominations look to the Bible as their primary authority in determining doctrine, ethics, church structure, and all other religious issues.

This strong reliance on the New Testament is based in part on the religious belief that it was divinely inspired. But it is also based on the belief that it is an accurate historical record written by men who experienced the lives of Jesus and the apostles firsthand. But some have challenged this traditional view, arguing that it was written much later, long after Jesus' original followers were dead and Christianity had transformed into a different religion than the one taught by Jesus of Nazareth.

The debate really comes down to the question: When was the New Testament written? And this question leads to another important question: Even if it was written at an early date, how do we know the New Testament that exists today is the same as the original? How do we know the modern translations aren't full of human errors, additional content, or the interpretations of countless human scribes?

Both of these questions are answered within the fields of paleography and textual criticism, which seek to analyze ancient manuscripts of the New Testament to determine their date and accuracy. The article that follows provides an overview of the most important New Testament manuscripts that have been discovered and outlines the process used to analyze those manuscripts.

The Role of Textual Criticism

No original manuscripts of the original Greek New Testament have been found. However, a large number of ancient manuscript copies have been discovered, and modern translations of the New Testament are based on these copies. As one would expect, they contain some scribal errors. In fact, "there is not a single copy wholly free from mistakes." {1}

That said, the variances are theologically inconsequential and the vast majority don't affect translation. It is the task of textual criticism, therefore, to study and compare the available manuscripts in order to discern which of the variations conforms the closest to the original. Bruce Metzger of Princeton University, a prominent modern textual critic, describes the role of textual criticism this way:

> The necessity of applying textual criticism to the books of the New Testament arises from two circumstances: (a) none of the original documents is extant, and (b) the existing copies differ from one another.

> The textual critic seeks to ascertain from the divergent copies which form of the text should be regarded as most nearly conforming to the original. In some cases the evidence will be found to be so evenly divided that it is extremely difficult to decide between two variant readings. In other instances, however, the critic can arrive at a decision based on more or less compelling reasons for preferring one reading and rejecting another. {2}

Paleography: Dating Ancient Manuscripts

Of course, the reliability of a given manuscript is based in large part on its age: earlier manuscripts are more likely to be accurate reflections of the original, so they are given more weight than later copies. It is therefore important for textual critics to know the dates of the manuscripts they are analyzing.

Carbon dating and other chemical methods are rarely used in determining the age of manuscripts. Instead, a paleographer analyzes the handwriting of the text, which yields a much more precise date than carbon dating would. A paleographer "cannot establish the exact date but he can confidently place one handwriting in the 30's and another in the 80's." {3}

The Earliest Extant New Testament Manuscripts

Textual critics and paleographers have a large number of ancient manuscripts at their disposal, many of which have been found within the last century. Nearly the entire New Testament exists in manuscripts dated to before 300 CE. Other important manuscripts date to the fourth and fifth centuries. The manuscripts dating from 100 to 300 CE are almost entirely papyrus fragments. These fragments are named with a "P" followed by a number. The vast majority of them were found in Egypt in the twentieth century, and are now kept in various museums and libraries throughout the world, including at Dublin, Ann Arbor, Cologny (Switzerland), the Vatican and Vienna.

The earliest manuscript of the New Testament was discovered about 50 years ago. P52 is a small papyrus fragment of the Gospel of John (18:31-33 on the front; 18:37-38 on the back), and it has been dated to about 125 AD. This makes it a very important little manuscript, because John has been almost unanimously held by scholars to be the latest of the four gospels. So if copies of John were in circulation by 125, the others must have been written considerably earlier. Moreover, the Gospel of John's greater theological development when compared with the other three gospels has led some scholars to conclude it was written as late as 120 or even 150 CE. The P52 fragment seems to make such late dates impossible. {4}

In addition to the early papyrus fragments, a large number of parchment manuscripts have been found that date from 300 CE onward. These are usually named for the place in which they were discovered and are abbreviated by a letter or

sometimes a number. The manuscripts A/02 (Codex Alexandrinus), B/03 (Codex Vaticanus), and Sin./01 (Codex Sinaiticus) contain nearly complete sets of the New Testament. By comparing these to the earlier papyrus fragments, they have been shown to be quite reliable.

Codex Vaticanus (B), the earliest of the great parchment manuscripts at about 300 CE, has resided in the Vatican since the middle ages and remains there today. It is one of the most important manuscripts for textual criticism.

Codex Sinaiticus (Sin.) dates to about 350 CE. It was discovered in 1844 in a monastery on Mount Sinai by a Russian. After some resistance, he persuaded the resident monks to allow him to take it to St. Petersburg. On Christmas Eve, 1933, the Soviet government sold it to the British Museum for 100,000 pounds. It was put on permanent display in the British Library, where it still resides, along with other early biblical manuscripts. {5}

Codex Alexandrinus (A), dating to circa 450 CE, was transferred from the Christian library in Alexandria to the British Library in the seventeenth century, where it still resides today. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* details its history as follows:

> Codex A was the first of the great uncials to become known to the learned world. When Cyril Lucar, Patriarch of Alexandria, was transferred in 1621

> to the Patriarchate of Constantinople, he is believed to have brought the codex with him. Later he sent it as a present to King James I of England; James died before the gift was presented, and Charles I, in 1627, accepted it in his stead. It is now the chief glory of the British Museum in its manuscript department and is on exhibition there. {6}

General Resources on New Testament Manuscripts

- Dating the Oldest New Testament Manuscripts by Peter van Minnen, Duke University, 1990.
- Duke Papyrus Archive Online archive of Duke University's extensive papyrus collection, with images and descriptions of each. Browse by topic or language. Also provides several articles on papyrology and information about the Duke archive itself.
- Interpreting Ancient Manuscripts Web Earlham University "The main focus of the web is on the process used to study the ancient manuscripts upon which the New Testament is based." Includes a complete table of extant Greek manuscripts, with the name, approximate date, location, and contents of each, along with a glossary of terms and numerous articles in the areas of paleography (materials, scribes, etc.), manuscript transmission, and textual criticism.

Papyri:

- Complete List of Greek NT Papyri Lists the name, date, content, and location of every extant papyrus fragment.
- John Rylands University Library of Manchester Special Collections The current home of P52. Web page contains an image of the fragment plus close-up view of the front and back, and background information.
- The Oldest New Testament: P52 Historian.net (personal web site of Jack Kilmon) Image of P52 with history of its discovery and publication, translation of the text and opinion on the identity of its author.

Codex Vaticanus:

- Catholic Encyclopedia Detailed article on the contents and history of the Codex Vaticanus.
- Codex Vaticanus B/03 By Wieland Willker, University of Bremen "I have set up this site to present some info on the worlds single most important biblical manuscript, Codex Vaticanus Graece 1209, B/03. Recently there has been made a new discovery by Philip Payne, the so called "umlauts," double dots which seem to indicate textual variants. This site describes the codex and these umlauts."
- Codex Vaticanus Earlham University Image of a page, brief overview of the Codex, and textual analysis of a passage
- Codex Vaticanus B Greek New Testament Magnificent Color Facsimile Here you can buy a facsimile of the Codex Vaticanus for the bargain price of $5800,

shipped from Rome. Site has several images.

Codex Alexandrinus:

- Codex Alexandrinus Earlham University Photo and description of a page from the Codex Alexandrinus.
- Codex Alexandrinus Catholic Encyclopedia Detailed list of the contents of A.
- Codex Alexandrinus (A) Bible Researcher Brief description of the contents, history of the manuscript.
- Katabi Bible resources pages Photo of a page from the Codex and brief history of how it came to reside in London.

Codex Sinaiticus:

- Codex Sinaiticus Catholic Encyclopedia
- Codex Sinaiticus Earlham University Image of a page, brief overview of the Codex, and textual analysis of a passage from John
- Rubrics in Codex Sinaiticus Large image of Song of Songs 1:1-4 in Old Greek from Tischendorf's facsimile edition of the Codex Sinaiticus, translation of the passage, and short explanation of the use of rubrics (writing in red ink).
- Codex Sinaiticus By James R. Adair, Jr. Describes the contents and history of the manuscript. An expanded version of the article that appeared in the Eerdman's Dictionary of the Bible.

Related Books

- British Museum Pamphlet on the Codex Sinaiticus
- Philip W. Comfort, The Text of the Earliest New Testament Greek Manuscripts.
- C.C. Edgar, Select Papyri.
- Bruce M. Metzger, The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration (1992). Full text is available online at Questia Online Library.
- Bruce M. Metzger, Manuscripts of the Greek Bible: An Introduction to Paleography.
- E.G. Turner, Greek Manuscripts of the Ancient World (1987).
- G. Cavallo & H. Maehler, Greek bookhands of the early Byzantine period, A.D. 300-800 (1987).
- Leighton Reynolds, Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature.
- C.H. Roberts, Greek Literary Hands (1956). On the dating of manuscripts with the aid of contemporary documents.
- J. Finegan, Encountering New Testament Manuscripts: A Working Introduction to Textual Criticism (1974).
- W.H.P. Hatch, The Principal Uncial Manuscripts of the New Testament (1939).
- H.J.M. Milne & T.C. Skeat, Scribes and Correctors of the Codex Sinaiticus (1938).

- D.C. Parker, Codex Bezae: An Early Christian Manuscript and its Text (1992). On the idiosyncratic manuscript D.
- C.H. Roberts, Manuscript Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt (1979).
- G. Zuntz, The Text of the Epistles (1956): on P46